



Christmas Special

# The PERFECT CHRISTMAS SPECIAL



EVERY Romantic loves Christmas. The magic and excitement of our great Winter festival goes straight to the Romantic heart. The cynical mutterings of the natives about commercialism mean little to Romantics—after all, the commercialism really belongs to that *other* world which is no part of our reality. They are not exposed to the subtle propaganda which constantly eats away at the normal, childlike joy of Christmas. They love the child in the manger, and carols move them, not infrequently, to tears. They love presents; the surprise, the wrapping, the wonderful sense that *anything* could be within. They love receiving them and love giving them. Not for them the off-hand shuffling-over of some dull gift, or the complaints that the whole thing is a bit of a bore. Not for them the dreary grown-up *cliché* that it is “just for the children”. For Romantics the world is a magical place and Christmas is the most magical time of all.

## PRESENTS

There is never any difficulty in finding presents for Romantics. The infuriating sort of person who does not seem to need anything in particular is rarely a Romantic. There are so many things we love: pictures, cigarette cases, cigarette holders, cocktail glasses, gramophone records, books—the world is full of beautiful books to enrich our lives. From an old 1950s paperback *Agatha Christie* to the latest 1936 *Austin Princess* there is a present for every purse and every occasion. Part of the beauty of presents among Romantics is that it is not simply a question of finding “something to give”. We are all building a world, and the artefacts of daily life are part of the material from which that world is built. Any Romantic present, be it a book or a telephone, a lighter or a gramophone record, is an addition to one's Romanthian life. Like children, we live in a world of boundless possibilities, perhaps that is why we love Christmas as children do.

## WRAPPING PAPER

Romantics are sometimes said to have expensive tastes—and usually they do when they can afford them (and even when they cannot!). Christmas wrapping paper is one exception.



Romantics like *cheap* wrapping paper. The good old-fashioned crinkly-thin stuff in strong, clear reds, greens, blues and yellows. None of your posh arty wrapping paper for us! Heavy, glossy eight-bob-a-sheet wrapping paper is not the thing at all. Nor is one keen on subtle blue and gold pin-stripes. Very jolly for other times of year, no doubt, but for Christmas we like Santas and Christmas trees and reindeer and snowflakes and all the proper things.

Real wrapping paper can be bought from market stalls, London Street vendors (still there next to the hot chestnut men, bless them!) and other cheapie places. Failing this, or for variety, use crepe paper or coloured tissue.

## CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards can be a bit of a touchy subject. Christmas is not a time for originality. The silver-embossed card with a dove and the word “Peace” is the Romantic's idea of a dreadful card. Humorous cards are not usually successful—especially ones which make fun of Santa. Many Romantics regard Santa as being under their special protection. Photographic cards are out (unless they are pre-War—preferably pre-Great War). Unseasonal cards of any sort are an obvious mistake.

The best cards are, of course, real ones, printed before the deluge. One can get them and should whenever possible. It is correct to write them lightly in pencil so that they can be re-used, for who knows when we shall see their like again? Next best are traditional designs: coaching inns, Santa, children decorating the tree, reproduction Victorian cards. It is

far easier to get Romantic cards now than it was a decade ago. Religious cards are wholly acceptable and some religious Romantics send no other kind, but again they must be traditional. A gaunt cross with “Peace” underneath it is hardly better than the version without the gaunt cross! You can never go wrong with cards that are too obviously “Christmas-y”, but it is easy to go wrong the other way.

## LIGHTING THE TREE

Candles on the Christmas tree are utterly charming. One can find little metal tree-candle-holders in some of the larger department stores and sometimes in the sort of grooshy-but-useful shop that one finds at Covent Garden. Candles are something of an event. One extinguishes the other lights and touches a taper to one candle after another, until the tree is a pyramid of the daintiest little white flames. Singing carols round the tree is delightful at this time. There is no danger of fire, provided one does not leave them unattended (and tree candles do not last that long, so one is unlikely to), but they can drop wax on the floor, so be careful with the placing of the tree, or put an old mat under it. Electric Fairy lights are so lovely that Romantics cannot but accept them even if the strict Victorian will not have them on his tree. Real glass ones, of course, are better than funny little plastic ones.

## DECORATIONS

It is not quite as true as it is with wrapping paper to say that Romantics like their decorations cheap. Extravagantly elaborate tree-fairies delight them, for example, and beautiful crystal confections. But paper chains should be paper. Those lovely coloured tissue-paper ones with the cardboard harlequin ends are the very best and Romantics will comb the shops for them (they are often made by a company called Paul Jones—whether this company has any connexion with the well-known dance we are unable to say). Having found them they use them year after year. Purists may insist on the gummed paper strips that one sticks oneself into real chains—but this is a matter of taste (quite literally if one does not like the glue!). What one does not like are “chains” made from high-gloss shiny plasticated-metallic stuff. Those lovely unfolding bells and balls made of the same tissue and with the same cardboard harlequin-patterned ends as the paper chains are just adorable: they unfold concertina-like into their ordained shapes and fold up neatly and easily for next year—unlike the paper-chains, which have lost all their “spring” after hanging out for the season and must be carefully flattened back into place be-

fore they are put away. The real gummed chains, of course cannot really be kept and are best thrown on the fire to make a charming blaze at midnight on Twelfth Night. Romantics always have a Twelfth-Night party.

Tinsel is topping, but we prefer the thinner, silvery, properly-metallic-looking strands to great bushy plastic-metallic ones.

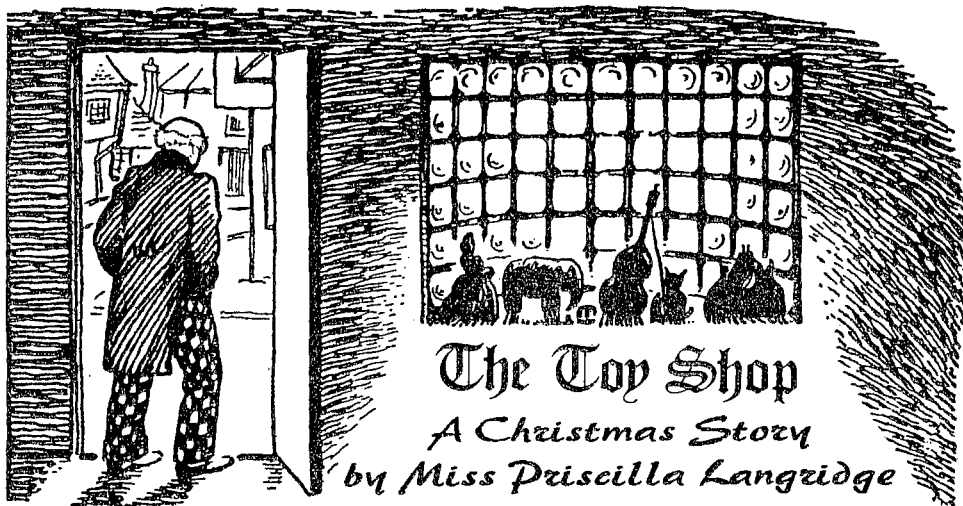
There was a vogue in the last decade of the 20th century for neo-Victorian decorations among the natives. Undoubtedly this was a healthy sign for them—a sign of a yearning for tradition however much it may be co-opted and nullified by the forces of cathode-darkness. The question is: is it good for us? Should Romantics adopt them because they are Victorian or reject them because they are late-20th-century? In a way they are charming but—like the very nice reproduction cards one sees—they have a certain phoney gloss of the period. A real 1950s card, though much less “traditional”, is a great deal more *real*. Similarly, are not ordinary coloured glass tree-balls (for example) which could have been seen in the '30s or the '50s more *real* than opaque varnished ones with charming little Victorian girls reproduced from Victorian magazines which, however charming, could only have been seen in the 1990s? The question is a delicate one. One must judge each item on its merits, consider one's own “house style” and the extent to which one can take the item out of the late 20th century and make it a part of one's own magical world. One can judiciously plunder Babylon to the great benefit of Romantia, but it takes a sure eye, a deft touch and a finely-balanced sense of the nature of one's own sanctuary.

Some Romantics hold that natural decorations are best, and certainly there should be holly and ivy, mistletoe and perhaps a kissing-bough.

## THE DURATION OF CHRISTMAS

All artificial decorations must, of course, be down before midnight on Twelfth Night on pain of bad luck (some natives now seem to be unaware of this, and one always feels rather worried for them). Decorations taken straight from nature, however, such as holly sprigs and mistletoe boughs, may, if one wishes, remain in place until Candlemas Eve (the first of February), and many Romantics regard the whole period from Twelfth Night to Candlemas as falling within the semi-festive glow of Christmas, as it did in the middle ages.

Whatever one's views on this, however, Christmas is certainly a twelve-day affair. The modern idea that Christmas is over on Boxing Day is one of the saddest remnants of the Victorian factory and office: the legacy, one



It will be all over by Christmas," they had said, and, of course, it was. The European Federation did not really want to fight, and once it was clear that Britain was not bluffing, but was prepared both to accept and to inflict heavy losses and to carry through to the bitter end, the European enthusiasm to crush the rebels rapidly evaporated, to be replaced by the usual internal bickering which had made the Federal Parliament such an ineffective body.

British independence, however, was not recognised by the Federation. Trading sanctions remained in operation and the forces of international finance, alarmed at the rebellion against their favoured World Order, directed a fierce onslaught against the new pound Sterling in the international money markets. The Dominions, awed by the international forces ranged against the Mother Country, mistrusting, after decades of British neglect, her continued good faith and still under the sway of liberal propaganda, held back from the system of co-operation proposed by the British Government. The African colonies were still to come.

In many ways, the first post-war year was a bleak one. Goods in the shops were severely restricted and the very future of Britain as a newly independent nation seemed extremely precarious. The dozens of television stations had suddenly fallen silent, as Britain, using the excuse that one could not tell which satel-

lites were being used for surveillance and weapons guidance purposes, had used her newly developed Sparrowhawk satellite-killer missile system to clear orbital space completely. Only the single channel of the Imperial Broadcasting Corporation could now be received with its formal, black-tie news announcements, its long intermissions and its quietly wholesome family entertainment.—And television was only broadcast for a few hours a day. Some rather old-fashioned psychiatrists began to talk of C.W.S. or Cathode Withdrawal Syndrome.

Is it a case of rose-coloured oculars, then, when people look back on that Christmas as one of the jolliest ever? We think not. There was a new mood in the country. We were free again. We were Britain again. There was a friendlier feeling—especially as the festive season approached—in public places. We were not strangers. We had something in common. We were British. The Christmas lights went up as always, and if there was less in the shops, there was a sort of enjoyment in "making do". Mr. Conrad Mandeville, the Minister of Supply, a well-spoken, avuncular figure, broadcast personally on the wireless and television (one spoke of them in that order now) giving official hints on how to make Christmas merry under the restricted circumstances—how many people actually made the famous Mandeville Plum Pudding is open to conjecture, but it certainly became a national joke. Sir Robert Devenish, the most popular Prime Minister since Churchill, also broadcast frequently, his wonderful, kind, persuasive voice ranging from the tone of fireside talk to that of a ringing clarion rousing the nation to vibrant wakefulness. People thought of him as a personal friend, if not a kind of father, and the

nation developed a strong sense of being a family, pulling together in adversity.

But it was not all austerity. London was also the capital of the gay life, largely because it was the only European capital where alcoholic drinks and tobacco were freely available. Despite sanctions, rich Europeans made their way over to a city which had the appeal of forbidden fruit. London was outside the permitted world, outside the "international community" as the rather antiquated phrase still had it. It was a wicked place according to the propaganda of the international press and broadcasting services, but those services were losing the respect of many intelligent and advanced people—at least to the extent that while most Europeans still half-believed them, they also enjoyed cocking a snook at their liberal pieties. London was where one heard the latest music—Europe was still dominated by the last gasps of late 20th century "pop" music relieved by second-rate imitations of the new British dance-bands. London, for the first time since the Regency was the centre of world fashion; the crisp, bobbed hairstyles, the bold, stylised make-up, the flared skirts and tailored jackets of the London "Pippsie" were copied all over the world. The Pippsie was feminine, dollish and fascinating, with Cupid's-bow lips and dark, lustrous eyes shadowed in Charcoal Brown. She represented a revolt against the feminist woman still promoted by liberal capitalism as a necessary part of its corporation-centred social order.

Even the innocence of England was, paradoxically, a forbidden fruit for Europeans. One was not supposed to be innocent. One had been told it continuously for the whole of most people's lifetime. The New Innocence of Britain was an evasion, it was escapism, it was the mask of a wicked anti-democratic social order. It was a fantasy. The British would have to Face Up To Reality In The End. And, after a lifetime of po-faced "frankness" and adulthood, it was enormous fun.

The social life of London had become more colourful in other ways. As liberal capitalism in Europe and America became daily more totalitarian, London became a haven for men who were hardly safe in their own countries—certainly not safe to speak their minds openly: monarchists and imperialists; people who disputed certain sacred myths of liberal history; followers of the lily banner of France and of the great double-eagle; Latvians and Lithuanians whose hearts ached at the exchange of submergence in Russia for deeper submergence in "Europe"; Russians who wished to be Russian again; patriots from everywhere who longed for the re-emergence of their sovereign nations from the faceless,

soulless labyrinth of the European Federation. Then there were the men of the new Southern Confederacy in America and of the Western Union: fledgling nations that had been crushed by the military might of the decaying Federal Government of the east and west coasts, but whose time was near at hand. Thus London Society was brightened by colourful uniforms and yet more colourful ideas: "The most cosmopolitan cocktail parties in the world," as some columnist had put it, "buzzing with the spirit of anti-cosmopolitanism."

Then there was the tiny nation of Romantia which had existed inside the British nation and some others as "a people apart", continuing to live in a civilised, if in some cases rather Bohemian, manner while the rest of the world collaborated with insanity. The Empress of Romantia had, a few months ago, declared Romantic secession from the modern world at an end, saying: "We have never wished to secede from England: we seceded from Babylon. Now that England too has seceded from Babylon, we are together again." A well-known Romantian writer put it more pointedly: "We never seceded at all. England seceded for a short and dishonourable time. Now she has returned and we welcome her back." Romantians were now rather fashionable. Romantic classics such as *Angels in Babylon*, which had enjoyed a small *samizdat* vogue at the end of the last century and became known to a growing *cognoscenti* during the first decade of this, were now read and talked about by thinking people everywhere. It was a commonplace that the life and literature of Romantia over the last several decades had been an important influence in the formation of the New Sensibility.

There was even some talk of dissolving the Romantian Empire as a thing no longer necessary, but Romantians had come to love the nation that had nurtured them for more than two generations, and the complex of bonds and friendships it had engendered had made it wellnigh indissoluble.

In any case, the future was yet uncertain. Perhaps the combined might of America and Europe would yet crush us into conformity with the international octopus (or "international community" as its lackeys still termed it). Perhaps Sir Robert would be assassinated by enemy agents (there had been no less than nine attempts so far) and no new leader be found to resist the thousand bribes, threats and pressures to which we were daily subject. "If Britain falls," Her Imperial Majesty had said, "Romantia must continue, and I dare to predict that she will no longer continue as a little movement, but as a great and swelling tide."

In the meantime, however, Romantians were suddenly appearing in London Society

with their extravagant clothes, their crystal-pure voices, their outlandish games and curious whims and customs. They were not quite as distinct from the general population as they had been a few decades ago, for the world was catching up with them, but they certainly turned heads—and hearts—wherever they went. They had been about before, of course, but always in tight cliques, freezing outsiders with scornful glances. Now they had opened up like flowers in spring, or like radiant hosts and hostesses welcoming the English back to the England that they themselves had never left.

Winter descended suddenly that year. The change from the mild, post-war late-Autumn to crisp, biting Winter came literally over night. London awoke one morning to windows feathered with frost and paving-Stones edged with glittering white. The fashionable chrome-Steel heels of the smart young ladies rang in the crystal air and the diamond vowels of the bright, new, Romantian-influenced Mayfair accent gleamed like fairy jewels amid clouds of whitened breath. Shop windows were bright with Christmas displays and coloured lights twinkled in the early-darkening Streets. People complained of course, but they also enjoyed the onset of real winter. The nation had regained its sense of fun. Shoppers stumbled over the unfamiliar pounds, shillings and pence, while chic, well-trained shop-girls and children whose young minds had been freshly drilled to it in school, looked superior. Nobody minded. It was *our* money, *our* shop-girls, *our* children, *our* England at long, long last. Yes, they are not so far wrong who say that this was the merriest Christmas of them all.

I should like to tell you a dozen stories about that Christmas, and perhaps some day I shall. Strange stories and ordinary stories, Romantic stories, adventurous stories and just plain, dear homely stories. Ask any one:—What were you doing that first Christmas after the War? and he will have a tale to tell, a tale of the Christmas when England began to breathe again. But the story I am going to tell is one that I think could only have happened in that year—at any rate it could not have happened before it. That, at least, is my belief, though I cannot prove it to be true.

It was not a happy time for all of us. The War, short as it had been, had entailed loss of life, and some of our finest young men did not live to see in the first New Year of freedom. They left behind them mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, wives and sweethearts to keep their memory green in that whitest of winters. Vivien Renfrew was a sweetheart. She had almost been a wife. Her fiancé had been killed on the day peace was announced.

He had been a hero of the terrible Battle of Dover when the entrance to the Channel Tunnel was taken from Euro hands in time to prevent the enemy tanks from pouring through. How proud she had been when the tunnel was destroyed with high-level uranium charges and Britain was an island once again. His had been among the first units in the famous Dublin Landings (Operation Rearguard) which had prevented the Euros from employing Ireland as an air-base and had re-united Britain after more than a century of separation. Then, on one of the very last coast-patrols of the War, his helicopter gunship had been shot down by an air-to-air missile. Vivien had heard the news of the end of the War hours before she learned of Michael's fate. She had made a festival in her heart, prepared to welcome him home, wondered how quickly the wedding might be arranged. She had never loved any one else: hardly even noticed any one else except the occasional film-star in her adolescent years, while he regarded her as a perfect virgin flower, a thing almost too fine and too delicate to be looked upon. Such romances are common enough now, I know. They were not so very rare then; but fresh as love always is in every generation, perhaps it had a special magic, a certain hour-before-the-dawn-like delicacy, because real romance was only just coming back into the world. The time when a girl might look upon a man as the perfect hero, and a man upon a girl as an angel-child unfolded from the wings of Heaven had been eclipsed through long and dirty decades. This generation—some of them, the best of them—had been like the children of a new creation setting their careful feet upon a virgin world.

And then the blow fell;—amid the rejoicing, the flags and bands, the cheering in the Streets. She had just put on her coat and hat and her new white gloves. She had not been rich. She had made do with a few old pairs, the oldest of which she had worn in the Sixth Form. The new ones—a very special pair—she had put into a drawer when she had them on her birthday. They would not come out until the end of the War. That day she drew them on before joining her friends at the fireworks. She met the telegram-boy as she opened the door. He gave it to her—so plain, so formal: neat, laser-printed Gothic type with a wide black border. How could something so small and white and neat destroy everything so utterly? The telegram-boy did not look at her face. He did not wait for a tip. She would not have noticed if he had.

How long ago had that been? Months, weeks or only a day or two? Time hardly seemed to register any more. It must have

been months because of the white gloves. The warm days were gone now and she wore her good calf-skin gloves that would keep for ever if one looked after them. She supposed it must be winter. Yes, it must be December. Christmas displays were not permitted until the first of December.

Not that she had gone into hiding. She had not. She had been out and about: the constant round of cocktail parties and dinners and shopping trips with friends and even a wild, late-night (or rather, early-morning) treasure hunt all over London with some of the Romantian "Pippies". Every one said it would do her good: help her to forget. Those who knew her superficially thought that it was working. But it was a ghost of herself that did these things. Her real self was as lonely and inaccessible as if it had lain beneath those millions of tons of concrete that they poured into the remains of the Tunnel.

One day she left a tea party early. She had felt as if her head was exploding and her lungs choking for the open air, but she had smiled sweetly and no one had known. She heard the alien laughter ringing in her head like the chattering of monkeys, and she knew the voice that irritated her so, that rang so terribly false, was her own voice. She walked through the early-darkening Streets. A group of girls—not so very much younger than herself—in school-green macs and velours with matching woolly scarves and gloves, with bright cheeks and bright noses, were singing "Hark the Herald Angels". A part of her heart surged toward them (was it thawing?) but the other part was divided from them by an impassable barrier. They were in another world: the world of the living. A little child pressed its nose against a toy-shop window, its mitten-palms flat against the glass.

Did they know what they had died for? It was one of the questions that swum round in her brain like fishes chasing their own tails. Did Michael know that his death had bought all this? That the world was safe and sane—at least for the present? Did those others, those countless others, who had died in the wars of the 20th century—did they know that they had fought and died so that our Empire might be betrayed and our nation and all the nations plunged into bottomless degeneracy? If so, how much happier must Michael rest than they. Or were they all, all who had fought for right and truth, were they all participants in this victory of right, however those past soldiers had been deceived? She was glad that he had died for goodness directly, for England's freedom and purification, not for her betrayal and besmirching. It mattered: it mattered terribly. Sometimes it comforted her. And some-

times it seemed not to matter at all, and all that mattered was that he was gone.

Another child passed her; a very striking child. Perhaps she was eleven or twelve, but despite her small size, her manner and bearing was somehow in advance of her age. She carried herself like a little queen. Her clothes were spotless and clearly of the finest quality, though, curiously, perhaps a shade outgrown. One hand nestled primly inside a large fur muff even while the other, in its expensive glove, clung manfully to a small suitcase whose weight might be becoming a little troublesome. Golden curls peeped from beneath her bonnet. As she passed Vivien they seemed each intensely conscious of the other. The child turned her limpid blue eyes upon the woman, who looked back at her with interest and curiosity: perhaps the first of either she had felt these several months. Who was this child? Why did she look so longingly at her? Why was she out alone? Why did Vivien feel this sudden impulse to scoop her up in her arms? Was it starvation of love? Was her mind turning at last from the fearful pressure inside her head that never ceased by night or by day? She looked away; hurried on. She must take hold of herself or she would end by doing something odd.

The wrenching away of Vivien's gaze was like a blow to the child. It had seemed to her the first warmth she had felt in ages and now it was snatched back like the gift of some tormenting elf. She turned for a moment and watched the smart young woman, who had passed her now, walk rapidly down the Street away from her and become lost in the crowd. She still heard the crisp click of her heels, still saw, in her mind's eye the neat, tight-waisted coat with its fur-trimmed collar and skirt. She lifted her head and walked on. She was her own mistress, this little one; and almost old enough to smile philosophically at the harsh disappointment of life, pretending, as adults do, that she did not really care: and like an adult, she often almost believed herself.

Her name was Livia: Livia Mary Anne Belinda Meredith Carman. Meredith was one of her middle names, not part of her last name, as she never forgot to explain. She was a war-orphan. Both her parents had been killed in the bombardment of London and her surviving relations were distant both in kinship and affection. She was an heiress of some small substance and, had she had her own way she would have bought a little house somewhere, taken Nanny to look after her and managed everything very nicely. But she was a minor. She could not make her own decisions until she was twenty-one and in the meantime Nanny had been dismissed as an extravagance, sever-

ing her last link with the kind old life which seemed a thousand years ago, but had in fact been alive and bustling earlier this year.

Her great-aunt was not dreadful (as Livia was often tempted to think, and occasionally to say), merely unimaginative, with a mind that could not leave the late 20th century. She went out to work, leaving the house cold and empty when the children (who, being the issue of a third marriage were clustered about Livia's age) came back from their day-school (not that the house was *physically* cold, of course. In fact it was always over-heated with that nasty, dry central-heating that made one's eyes feel dry and sore, and had been, for some reason, so popular in late-Elizabethan times; but it was no less cold for that). When Livia had first gone there, there had been a television, pouring into the drawing room things she had never seen or imagined before—awful people with hateful clothes and hateful voices, saying and doing all the things she had been taught never to say or do. It seemed like a mad-house yawning into the room with its multi-coloured denizens screeching and contorting themselves like obscene devils. How could they not see how mad and evil it all was? But they did not. Father, mother and children sat placidly in front of it like so many rice-puddings, blandly absorbing everything. As a matter of fact, the parents were not entirely supine: they criticised much of what was broadcast, sometimes quite fiercely, but never for a moment did it occur to them actually to stop poisoning themselves and their children with it. They did, it is true, prevent the children from watching the very worst things, but since (despite various much-publicised "reforms") the standards of broadcast material were hardly better than those which had prevailed in the closing decades of the 20th century, this counted for little, almost every broadcast item being in some way, whether grossly or subtly, corrupting and undermining of civilised standards.

For weeks, Livia thought that she must go mad herself. She felt ill, her mind was feverish, sometimes she screamed aloud at the horror of it, but they all said that it was just a reaction to the shock of losing her parents. Then, mercifully, the missiles went up and the screen was silenced. When it came back on it had changed. It was sane, human, decent. It seemed like a faint echo of her own dear home.

The end of television was perhaps the greatest relief she had ever felt; but it had some troubling consequences. Her great-aunt's children, who, until now, had seemed only to half-notice her suddenly became fretful and ill-tempered. They had always distressed her by using the ugly language and manners that they had learned from the tele-

vision, but now it was turned often upon her, as if the resented intruder was all of a piece with the other unwelcome change that had been forced upon them. It was perhaps unwise of Livia to talk freely of how glad she was that the television had gone; but she was very young. In her innocence and trustfulness, she was, indeed, far younger than those cynical little cathode-worldlings who knew everything a child should not know in appalling detail, but without any of the spiritual or moral understanding which should accompany such knowledge; yet in their gross, untutored passions and utter lack of inward resources, these children seemed far younger than Livia—rather as if the minds of grasping toddlers had been implanted in the bodies of hulking pre-adolescents. The long hours between school and bedtime had suddenly become a desert to these children, and their only entertainments seemed to be teasing, fighting, sulking and damaging things. The new Imperial children's programmes, which they derided, yet watched with the voracity of a pack of starved wolves, would slowly have some degree of good effect upon them, but that was in the future.

So why, to return to Vivien's unspoken question, was the child out on her own? The truth was that she had run away: whether for good or not, she was not quite sure, for she was a sensible child and realised the complications involved, but certainly for the present. The fundamental reasons for her flight the reader must already know, but the immediate cause was Floradora.

Floradora was Livia's oldest surviving friend. She could not remember a time when she had not known Floradora, although, in point of fact, there had been exactly two years in which she had not, for Floradora had been a present on her second birthday. Floradora was a soft doll with a funny little smile and the brightest, most twinkling eyes you ever saw. It is true that she was a little the worse for her nine years or so; for Floradora had lived life to the full. Very few things had Livia done that Floradora had not done too. She was a veteran of half a hundred picnics. She was an experienced equestrienne and had taken tumbles both with and without her mistress. She had been a nurse in her time, taking care of sick teddies and she was the most sympathetic listener in the world. There was not a joy or a sorrow had passed through Livia's susceptible little heart that Floradora had not shared, feeling it at least as keenly as Livia herself. As a consequence of all this, of course, the grass and gravel and tears and cuddles of the years had taken their toll, and it was perhaps only to the eye of love that she was still the prettiest doll in the world.

The children at the new house certainly did not think her so. In fact they despised dolls altogether and found it an endless source of heartless merriment that Livia was still so deeply attached to what David, (the eldest boy) called "a grubby piece of stuffed rag". In one of her fits of friendliness, Jaqueline (the youngest girl) had urged her to "throw it away", explaining that although she was two years younger than Livia, she never touched dolls. The very word "it" was enough to freeze Livia's heart, and her face set into "that stupid superior look" (the adjective was not always "stupid") that the children so disliked.

She had suffered a certain amount of teasing over Floradora even at her dear old school (of which she could now remember no ill at all), but being a self-contained child among civilised girls it had not troubled her greatly. With the withdrawal of the cathode-drug, however, Livia-baiting seemed at times to be the main form of amusement, and the attacks upon Floradora became monstrous at the very time when the doll had come to represent the last link in Livia's mind with a world that was sane and kind and good. Floradora was stolen from her, hidden, snatched away and thrown from one child to another as Livia chased wildly about the room trying to recover her. Floradora was Livia's achilles heel; the one way to break through her contained, aristocratic indifference, and having discovered an achilles heel, the children kicked it for all they were worth—or perhaps for rather more than that.

The last straw had come that day. It was a half-holiday. Livia had been fearing it for weeks. Great-aunt was out at work, of course. Floradora had been missing all morning, following a momentary relaxation in Livia's perpetual watchfulness. The children, rather than following her increasingly despairing efforts to find her with laughter and catcalls, were strangely absent. One heard giggles round corners and clattering of feet, but the children obviously did not want to be seen. In the end, Livia returned listlessly to her bedroom (which she had searched thoroughly twice). There was Floradora, hanging by a length of electrical wire from the light fitting. One leg had been pulled off and her tummy was torn open with a penknife, right up to the neck. Her wounds were soaked in red ink which had spread all over her front, up half her face and down part of her remaining leg. Everything (although Livia was not in a position to appreciate this) had been done in careful imitation of the methods depicted in *Slasher IV*, one of the last films the children had seen on the television before it had finished. Luckily it had

been shewn in the late afternoon, after school and before Katie and James (their mother and father) were in to stop them.

The children waited to see what would happen. Would she scream the way she used to sometimes when the television was on? Would she cry and howl? Would she come out and try to attack them (that would be best!)?

They waited and waited, but nothing happened. Nothing at all. She was completely quiet. She did not even cry—or if she did she must have her head under the covers. After a time, they tried to go in, but she had locked the door. They had not even known she had a key—none of them were supposed to have keys, but all the keys fitted all the doors in that house, and Livia had found one in the broom-cupboard weeks ago and always locked her door at night, leaving the key turned in the lock so that another key could not be used from the outside, and waking up to unlock the door early in the morning, so no one should know it had been locked. They rattled and knocked and called, but there was no answer. What *was* she doing.

"You don't suppose she's *hanged* herself—to be with the doll?" whispered Jaqueline.

"Don't be a [foul word]," snapped David, but the colour left his cheeks.

Livia's room was on the ground floor. As soon as she had seen Floradora she had quietly taken her down and wrapped her in the little woollen shawl in which the doll had always slept at night. She moved calmly and quietly, her mind numb, her pain too deep for tears. She locked the door very gently and put on her best dress and shoes, her best coat and hat. She packed a few things into her little suitcase, put on her best leather gloves, picked up her muff and climbed carefully out of the window as she had so often done in her imagination. By the time the children began to worry about her, she was half a mile away.

As the dusk began to close in, Livia realised how tired she felt. Her suitcase was getting heavier with every step. She had money sewn into the lining of her coat (Mummie had sewn it there when she went on a school trip "just in case") but would she dare to take a room at an hotel? Did they take children travelling alone or would they inform the police?

She was not dead, even in her distress, to the atmosphere of the streets. They seemed in a way more like home than the house she had left,—which made her feel more homeless than ever. She looked up at the lighted windows of the houses, glowing into the dusky air, and imagined real homes, English homes, homes that were not cold, chaotic remnants of an older and darker time. She enjoyed, in a distant sort of way, the friendly bustle of the

post-War crowd, the bright windows of the shops, the fairy lights and the Christmassy scent in the air. Christmas! Oh, her heart lurched inside her. What would Christmas be without Mummie and Daddy, without Nanny, without even Floradora—or only a poor disfigured remnant of Floradora. No! What was she saying. Floradora was still with her, she was still Floradora. She was only hurt, poor dear, and Livia must look after her, as Floradora would have looked after Livia if she had been terribly broken in a railway accident or something.

She turned down a little side-street, out of the bright lights of the shops. With every street she entered, she was more conscious that she had no idea where she was going or what she would do. Suddenly she heard a heavy tread behind her. She glanced backwards, pretending to think she might have dropped something. It was a policeman. She saw the chain of his little brass wireless-caller hanging across his front. "Be calm," she said to herself. "Don't start running yet." She turned carelessly into the next side street and then, as soon as she was properly round the corner, broke into a run. Every time she saw a turning she took it, hoping to baffle pursuit. She ran until her breath gave out, then leaned up against a pillar-box, panting. The street was quiet. No sign of the policeman or any one else. Just frost and silence and a light mist coming up, the first trace of the Great Fog.

It was a funny old street, full of very old houses and one or two old shops. Most of the shops were dark, but one had a flickering yellow glow in the windows. They were bow-fronted windows with all sorts of toys displayed: old-looking toys (or they might have been the latest thing). The shop itself looked as if it had been there, unchanged, for two hundred years at least. Above the window, the sign-board, which one could just make out by the street-lamp (that was a very old one, too) read:

TOY SHOP  
and 'Dolls' Hospital

Livia's heart jumped. This was it! This was what she had been looking for even though she did not know it. Would it still be open? At least the lights were on. She ran over to the door and there was a sign saying:

OPEN

Of course, one could not always believe these signs. Daddy used to say. The door was closed. She tried the handle. It moved, but the door stayed still. Was it locked, or only very stiff? She put down her suitcase and pushed it with all her might. Still it would not move.

She rammed it with all the weight of her small body, once, twice, three times, and with a crash it came open, the great iron bell-on-a-spring inside clanging like one of the new fire-engines until she thought it would never stop. Livia picked up her case and went in, closing the heavy door behind her. The noise of that bell might have woken the dead, but still no one seemed to be there. She looked about her. Everything seemed very old. The toys were beautifully made and terribly old-fashioned (old-fashioned toys were fashionable now, of course, but they were never so well-made). There was a feeling of oldness—almost of *ancientness* about everything.

Still she was alone in the shop. Everything fascinated her. Ordinarily she could have looked about for ages. The toys seemed so magical: yes, so truly magical. But she was not here for herself. She was here for Floradora, and she was terribly worried about the shop closing.

"Is any one here?" she called in a voice which was meant to be loud, but came out rather cracked and nervous. No answer. "IS ANY ONE HERE?" she shouted again, properly this time: in fact loud enough to startle herself a little.

From somewhere in the back of the shop a voice came to her:

"Very well, very well. I am coming. Not an impatient child, I hope. I do dislike *impatient* children."

It was an old man's voice, and in another half-minute (which is quite a long time when you are waiting) the owner of the voice appeared. He had a bald head with a shock of white hair just above each ear which carried on round the back: and when I say white hair, I do not just mean grey. It was whiter than any hair you have seen. Whiter than snow, I fancy. He had a great white beard that came half-way down his chest and eyes like bright blue sapphires that seemed deeper and older than the sea. He looked older than anything in the shop. He looked older than anything Livia had ever seen, except for really old things in museums from before Roman times, and perhaps he looked older than them. It seems a queer thing to say about a person, I know. But there is a sense of ancientness about really ancient things, and this old man had it. Of course Livia knew that he could not really have been that old, but he had that feeling.

The old man seemed to be looking at Livia almost as hard as she was looking at him. All of a sudden she felt a bit shy, but she did not shew it.

"What a fine specimen of a child," he said, as if he was talking to some one else, or to himself. "Carries herself like a queen. Reminds me of — well, never mind that. Child

like that has a right to be impatient—almost. Are you impatient, child?" This last part was the only part which seemed to be said to Livia.

"No, sir," replied Livia. "So long as you are not about to shut the shop, I am not in a hurry at all."

"Shut the shop?" said the old man, "Heh! Shut the shop? Well, I suppose I ought to shut it sooner or later. No hurry about that, though. Now what can I interest you in? A hoop? Girls like hoops, don't they? This one is a seven-league hoop. Bowl this in London and you can be in York in half an hour, and back in time for tea."

"Thank you, no, I——"

"A kite then! This one will fly you to the land beyond the clouds. You could dance with the sylphs of the air, providing you hold on to the string. *Never let go of the string*, my dear. It is not expensive. Not for what it is."

"No, please sir, is there a dolls' hospital here?"

"A dolls' hospital," chuckled the old man in mock-derision. "A dolls' hospital. This is *the* dolls' hospital. There isn't another one worth going to. They are not hospitals at all. Just stitch-and-mend merchants and give you another one like it if the damage is too bad. They are not hospitals. They do not *heal*. Now where is the patient?"

Livia opened the front of her coat and took out a small, woolly bundle. She half-unwrapped her poor, mutilated darling and handed her, shawl and all, to the old man. He looked long and hard at Floradora.

"O, this is bad," he said at last, "this is very bad."

Livia's heart sunk. It was the first time she had seen Floradora since the initial shock had worn off, and, as the old man said, it *was* very bad. There was no real hope that Floradora could ever be properly mended—not without practically replacing all of her.

"Y-you cannot do it, can you?" said Livia, on the verge of tears. "I'm not being rude, sir. Nobody can do it, can they? There is no hope at all."

"Hope, my dear? There is always hope," said the old man firmly. "But you are right. I cannot do it. Not on my own. Not without some help from you. You see this little girl is nearly dead. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And do you know why she is nearly dead?"

"Yes," said Livia fiercely. "Because they have hurt her so badly."

"No," said the old man, "that is not the reason. The reason she is nearly dead is because you think she is. What is her name, now?"

"Floradora."

"Well, you look at this poor hurt thing and you think 'she is hardly Floradora any more'. That is what you think is it not?"

Livia nodded. Her face was flushed and tears were not far away.

"You want to cry, do you not?"

Livia shook her head untruthfully.

"Now what I want you to do is take Floradora in your arms and talk to her. Tell her you still love her and you still believe in her. Do you remember Tinkerbell? She will never get well unless you believe in her."

He handed the little bundle back to the child. She felt awkward and embarrassed. She said nothing.

"Does Floradora ever talk to you?" asked the old man. Livia nodded.

"Out loud?" She shook her head.

"Can you hear what she is saying now?" She shook her head again.

"Can you not? That is very odd, because I can hear her. I can hear her quite plainly. She is saying 'Mummie'. Very quietly she is saying it, because nearly all her strength is gone. 'Mummie, talk to me.' And the old man made his voice sound so much like that of a little doll that Livia felt that was just what Floradora must be saying.

"Oh Floradora," she cried, forgetting the old man, forgetting everything. "Oh Floradora, darling dear, of course Mummie will talk to you. Of course Mummie loves you, always and always——" her tears broke forth like a dammed-up wave of grief and love and misery. She crooned and keened over the doll as if she represented all of goodness that was left in the world: "Oh, Floradora, Floradora, Floradora-dora-dora, Mummie loves you always and always and always." How long she poured out her poor, motherless heart she could not tell. After a time she became aware of the old man, quietly watching her; but it did not seem to matter. He smiled kindly and gave her a big, white clean handkerchief to replace her sodden small one.

"Good girl," he said. "That was the difficult part. The rest will be easy. Give the patient to me." She gave him Floradora and he disappeared into the back of the shop, leaving Livia to recover herself. When he returned, she was as queenly and composed as ever. She returned his handkerchief with exquisite grace. "Thank you so much for lending it to me. It is a bit messy, I'm afraid."

"What else are handkerchiefs for, heh?"

"Do you think you can make her a little bit better?"

"Floradora, you mean? No. We cannot make her a little bit better. We can make her *completely* better, if that will do."

"Completely better, oh, can you really?"



"I should think so. So long as the patient has the spark of life—the spark you give her—then the rest is easy. Look after the essence and the substance will look after itself—with a little help, of course. *Forma* is the great thing. *Materia* is only secondary. Do you understand me?"

Livia shook her head.

"Dear me, back to the dumb-girl, are we? Speak up, child, do you understand me?"

"I am afraid not, sir."

"Much better, much better. Well, let me put it another way. I have a fairy nurse in the back, and she will make Floradora better. Do you understand that?"

Livia laughed. First he treated her as if she were much older than she was, and now as if she were much younger.

"No laughing matter, my child. Never laugh at fairies. Please outgrow that childish habit. Now, who did this dreadful thing to Floradora?"

Livia had not been angry before. She had felt first numb, then lost. Suddenly her rage flared up inside her: "Beastly, hateful wicked children!" she shouted.

"Ought to be punished," said the old man.

"Yes. Punished and punished and punished."

"Let me shew you something." The old man took a doll from under the counter. It was a very strange-looking doll—a wax doll with no clothes and no proper face. The old man breathed on his fingertips and squeezed the blank wax face gently, rubbing it until was softened and shaped. He shewed it to Livia.

"Does that remind you of any one?"

Livia looked. It was very peculiar. In a way, the face had no features at all, but in another way—the way one can see faces in a damp patch on the wall—it looked just like David.

"Yes," said Livia. "It is the worst beast of them all."

"If I were to give you this," he put the wax doll into her hand, "and this," he gave her a long, wicked-looking pin, "then you could punish him." She felt that it was true. That if she stuck the pin into this doll, David would be hurt.

"How much?" she asked.

"Nothing," said the old man. "You can borrow them for a minute and give them back to me."

Livia thought for a full minute, biting her bottom lip a little, and then put the doll and the pin on the counter. "Thank you," she said. "I don't think I shall, if you don't mind."

"Good girl," said the old man again. "You have passed the test. Now let us see how Floradora is coming along."

He disappeared into the back and returned, quite quickly this time, with Floradora.

"Here we are," he said. "Right as nine-

pence." And so she was—except that "right as ninepence" was really rather an understatement. At first one might have thought that Floradora had been thrown away and a brand new doll of the same sort had been brought out instead; but Livia knew that was not true. To begin with, she had Floradora's particular look: she had all the personality that Floradora had acquired in nine years of living life to the full. Then again, she was—well, she did not look like a *manufactured* doll any more. She did not look like a hand-made doll either. It is hard to say what she *did* look like. She was still cloth, but somehow she looked *real*. Her eyes twinkled more than ever, and one could believe that at any moment she might really speak out loud.

"Oh, she is wonderful, just wonderful," said Livia.

"That is what you have made her," said the old man. "The essence is the thing. The substance is but a matter of—well, the fairy nurse has done a good job, has she not?"

"How much will it be?" asked Livia.

"Let me see now—I think a farthing should cover it." Livia felt surprised. Of course the new money was worth much more than the old, but a farthing seemed very little: besides, farthings had not been introduced yet; they were coming in next year. She looked in her purse and gave him a halfpenny. The old man opened his loud, ringing till and took out a farthing change. It was a very old, worn farthing, but Livia noticed that it had next year's date on it.

"Thank you so much," said Livia. Thank you so very much." She turned to go.

"Just a moment, my child," said the old man. "Do you not want to buy something? The things you can buy in this shop you will never see anywhere else."

"It is getting late," said Livia, who was perhaps feeling just a touch afraid. "Another day—"

"Another day, my dear? Another day? There will be no other day. Do you know where to find this shop?"

"Not quite, I was a bit lost."

"Nobody finds this shop except those who are lost, and never more than once in a lifetime. It is now or never, my child."

Livia had the door a little open and wisps of thick white fog crept in about the frame. She hesitated, almost ready to run.

"Where will you go, my child, if you leave this shop? Where will you take Floradora?"

She shut the door and came back to the counter. Having made the decision she felt at ease again. The old man adopted the manner almost of an ordinary shopkeeper.

"Now, what shall I shew you, heh? Kites

and hoops no good in your case, I fancy: nor teddies or dollies—not with Floradora. How about this?" He produced a kaleidoscope fashioned in shining ebony, with brass fittings at top and bottom. Livia put it to her eye and turned it. Beautiful patterns formed and reformed in bright, rich colours, like a stained-glass rose-window in some mediæval cathedral. A good kaleidoscope is always beautiful, but this was no ordinary kaleidoscope. Its reds and greens and blues were the pure essences of colour unsoiled by the corruption of the world. And among the shifting, glorious patterns, as limitless and as perfect as the ideas of the angels, more and more clearly, Livia saw a face: a kind, gentle, loving face, a face she seemed to recognise. It was not her mother, though it reminded her of her mother. It was—it was—of course! It was the woman she had passed in the street. The one whose eyes had met hers and been torn away again.

At last she lowered the kaleidoscope and blinked in the common light of the shop.

"Did you see your heart's desire?" asked the old man.

"I think so," said Livia.

"Excellent, excellent. That is the difficult part: knowing what one wants. The rest will be easy. Now, here is your Christmas present." He opened a little velvet-covered box and took out a wonderful gold ring with a red stone that glowed like the middle part of a roaring winter fire. "I hope you do not mind that it is not wrapped, but I think we should use it right away. Put it on my dear, it is a wishing ring. A very special wishing ring. In fact, if I may say so, it is the very best sort of wishing ring. It only grants one wish, so you must make sure it is the right one. But once it has granted the wish you must not throw it away"—as if she ever would!—"for as long as you keep the ring, it will protect your wish and keep it safe and true. That is why I say it is the very best sort of wishing ring. So think hard, and then wish hard."

"But sir, do you think I should wish for—"

"Oh yes. Wish away."

She closed her eyes tightly and concentrated with all her might. She held her breath as she wished, held it for as long as she could, and then, just as she could hold it no longer the door of the shop burst open, the bell clanged as if to wake the dead, and there was the woman from the street.

"I am so sorry for the noise," she said. "The door was dreadfully stiff."

"Yes," said the old man. "It is stiff. Heh! Keep meaning to do something about it. Never do. You know how it is." He was the oldest man she had ever seen. He had an air of *ancientness* about him; like the very old things

in the museums, and his hair was whiter than the frosted fog. "What can I do for you, madame," he asked. "I have tops that will hum a baby into dreamland, however fretful she may be, and make her see visions that will uplift her soul for as long as she may live; I have a jack-in-the-box that can—"

"Really I did not come to buy toys at all. I saw your windows still lighted—I was lost and I came in for directions. I hope you do not mind."

"Lost? But of course you are! And of course we can give you directions. But, dear lady, it is Christmas and business is slow, tucked away in these back streets. If I do not sell a few things at Christmas—"

"Yes, of course I will buy something from you, but I fear I shall have no one to give it to."

"Ah, fears, fears. Do not take too much notice of them; that is my advice. Now how about this doll?" He took Floradora from Livia. Strangely Vivien had not seen Livia, and did not see her now. She looked at Floradora and her face changed suddenly and beautifully.

"But this is the most wonderful doll I have ever seen!" she said.

"Yes, yes," agreed the old man. "A great deal of personality. That is the thing, you know, personality. The essence of the thing. The substance is unimportant, you know—relatively unimportant—but the essence—"

"How much is she?"

"Quite expensive, I fear. And you could not take her on her own. You would have to take a little girl to look after her."

"A little girl?"

"A little girl, yes. That one over there, to be precise. You do not get a choice I fear, but then the right choice has been made for you, so it does not much matter."

For the first time Vivien looked at Livia. Livia's eyes were full of hope and fear and a certain giggly glee all at the same time. Vivien's heart went out to her as it had in the street, but this time without restraint. She stared at her full of love and longing and saw the same love and longing returned.

"Well, it is no good just standing there," said the old man. "Why don't you pick her up and cuddle her? She is just about light enough. Another year's picking-up left in her, I should say. Eighteen months at a pinch."

Crossword Answers (no peeking!)

ACROSS: 3 coordinate; 8 grow; 9 outclasses; 11 Santa; 14 stare; 16 growl; 19 spanner; 20 okays; 21 attic; 22 ability; 23 sassy; 24 swill; 25 being; 30 pads; 31 terracotta; 32 stunt; 33 unmanly; 34 DOWN: 1 oppressors; 2 portly; 3 cross; 4 often; 5 delta; 6 nest; 7 team; 12 advice; 13 tension; 15 essay; 16 pray; 17 obtainable; 18 lacklustre; 25 bacon; 26 inter; 27 gray; 28 rein; 29 aria.

Make good use of it."

At last, Vivien's arms could hold the child no longer. She let her down with a bump and turned worriedly to the old man.

"But you can't—you can't just adopt children like that. There are formalities, and I am unmarried and she probably has guardians and—"

"All wished away," said the old man. "That is the beauty of those rings. Only wish they were easier to come by."

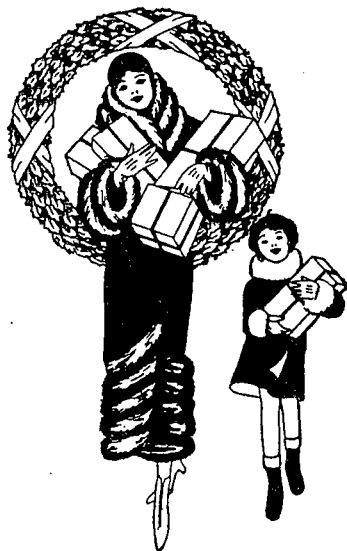
"But you don't understand, life is not like that—"

"Shew her the ring, dear child," said the old man. Livia held out her hand and Vivien looked into the ring.

"It is very pretty," she said, "but it does not change anything."

"Does not change what?" asked Livia.

"Does not change—oh, whatever it was. It is getting late, darling, and we must be going home."



#### CROSSWORD: CLUES ACROSS

3. Bring parts into proper relation with officer in charge, otherwise noise devoured.
8. The sixteenth row in the cinema or the front seat in the ship?
9. Take out a hundred girls to discover what the Romantian mind does to the Babylonian.
10. Promoters of Babylonian "music" and broadcasting might run back to the top of the Christmas tree.
11. Satan is confounded by the living spirit of Christmas cheer.
14. Look hard for the first sign of Christmas—in the right direction, of course!

16. Add fifty to eight and go about in search of prey.

19. One who measures by hand? Or could it be the undoing of a vulgar lunatic?
20. Dreadful American assents.

21. The highest chamber seen framed in a lattice window.

22. I lit bay giddily, giving what it takes to do it.
23. Why, I jingle with three shillings and end up with a milksop.

24. Pipsies will find it in the end but never eat it.

25. Begin afresh to find the State of all manifest existence.

30. Daddy, Penny and Bob are beastly souls—unless we have mis-heard!

31. The ground of the classics, a baby's bed and his small word of thanks—of such things are true flowerpots made.

32. Put shillings and pounds before archæological discovery—what an imputation!

33. Emasculate, nearly, without a description of late 20th century behaviour.

#### CLUES DOWN

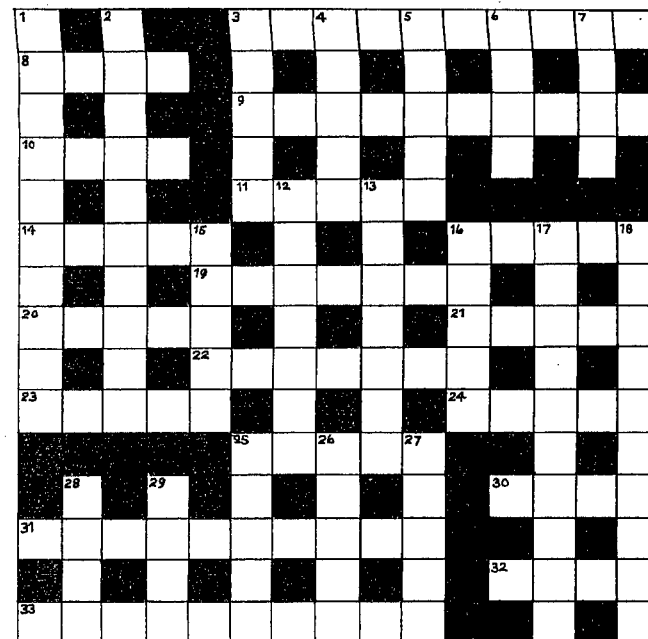
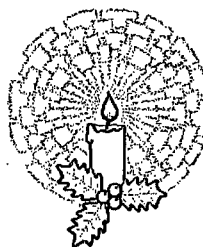
1. A confused spoor surrounds one of the main weapons of these people.
2. Harbour artist then deviously slay his works.
3. The kind of word this is!
4. Frequently of two short of a dozen.
5. River breaks up and is dealt around.
6. Sent round to where the little birds live.
7. Meet up to do what the natives do.
12. Horticultural photoplay-actress sits in front of food—sheer greed!
13. Decimal quantities and electrically-charged atoms create nervous strain.
15. We hear the Brownshirts in the attempt.
16. Gives praise? Sounds like it.
17. East pound an eye sound at box office. It's all up, but you can get it.
18. Tackle thirty-two about this description of the modern world.
25. No cab drives up for this delicious accompaniment to the Christmas fowl.
26. Bury him between one thing and another.
27. Another accompaniment to the Christmas dinner. This one sounds like a letter of obscure colour—stir it a bit and it is, in America!
28. Deer for eleven.
29. Song rises to the article and becomes another.

#### Christmas Crackers

Q. Who would lose most in a revolution, the king or the people? A. The king would lose a crown but the people would lose a sovereign.

Rich and vulgar young man: "I mean to marry one of your girls. Have I your permission?" Stately old gentleman: "Certainly. Which one interests you? The parlourmaid or the cook?"

## The Perfect Christmas Crossword



#### A PANTIMINE FOR EXILES

"Three hundred years in the making!"

THE coming year at the cinema looks—insofar as this reviewer's eyes can penetrate the veil of the future—utterly thrilling, with some truly fascinating new photoplays promised by the great Studios. Perhaps the most remarkable promise of all is a new Shakespeare production from Warner Brothers. As you know, there have been very few Shakespeare productions since Mr. Lawrence Olivier's splendid performances back in the 1930s and '40s, but here comes a bang-up-to-date, thoroughly 1930s production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which, from all accounts, is a formidable contender for the title of Film of the Year even before the year has begun!

I hope there is not an element among our readership which will exclaim "Dreary old Shakespeare for Film of the Year! Give us romance and excitement, glamour and gaie-

ty!" If there is, I suppose it would be in vain to tell you that Shakespeare is full of those things. But what if I tell you that this film stars Mr. Dick Powell the hero of all those glittering musicals? And Mr. James Cagney, Miss Olivia de Havilland and even young Master Mickey Rooney. I thought that would make you sit up. Now suppose I lean across and whisper, in the immortal words of Peter Pan: "And Wendy! There are fairies!" Because there certainly are. Of course, there were always fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but these will be fairies as you have never seen them before, using all the tricks of moving-photographic "special effects" to create the most enchanting fairy-scenes imaginable. Dance sequences have been arranged by the finest ballet-choreographers from Europe and the music is that of Mendelssohn, sumptuously arranged by that master-hand Mr. Erich Wolfgang Korngold who has long occupied the rainbow bridge between the magic world of the classical concert-hall and the magic world of Hollywood.

For those of us marooned in Babylon, there is no possibility of attending a real, untainted pantomime next year; nor even, Babylon being what it is, would many of us risk a live performance of Shakespeare; but with such delightful magical entertainment as this, one can look forward to charm beyond measure.

I doubt if there are many doubters left ➔



# I Resolve



## NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

**T**HE new year is a time for—well, apart from drinking lots of cocktails and singing *Auld Lang Syne*—the new year is a time for making a fresh beginning, and for making resolutions to improve one's life.

Are resolutions possible? I mean do they work—or do they end up lying about the house as broken as the Christmas toys? Well, not *all* the toys get broken, do they? And neither need *all* the resolutions—if (rather like the toys) *they are properly made*. So what is the proper way to make new year's resolutions? First of all, they should be clear and simple and not too wide-ranging. "I resolve to be good and kind and utterly charming" is an example of a resolution which is like pie-crust—made to be broken. "I resolve to be a dashing Romantic,

← among the children (of whatever age) and the Pippies among you: but what of the more serious reader? I know what you are asking. "What *have* they done to Shakespeare with such razmatazz and such a—well, such a *curious* cast?" Well, we are assured that the *Swan of Avon* has been treated with great respect and that the photoplay, while certainly enchanting (as, after all, it should be) is a faithful rendition of the world's greatest whimsical comedy.

Reviewers in America have already seen advance shewings of the film. *Picturegoer* magazine writes:—"You must see it if you want to be in a position to argue about the future of the film!" The popular columnist, Mr. Robert Forsythe tells his readers:—"The publicity push behind the film is tremendous—it is going to be a success or every one at Warner Brothers is going to get fired."

Of course they are a touch prone to exaggeration, these Americans (I do not suppose *every one* would be "fired", for example—perhaps just one in ten *pour encourager les autres*), but this is certainly going to be a film not to miss. See it through the Imperial Cinema Club, or at your local Romantic Cinema.

immaculately dressed and perfect in speech and manner" is another. Not that these are not entirely laudable intentions. They are, of course; but they are too general, too sweeping, and also too big—one is apt, in a day or two, to be stricken with the miserable feeling that one has really not lived up to one's ideal, so what is the horrid point anyway?

Now, I am about (as the sharper minds among you may already have guessed) to suggest that one takes simpler, more definite aims such as wearing a hat or giving up television. Some readers may say, however, and very reasonably too: That is all very well, but some of us *need* to make big, sweeping changes. At the rate of one or two bites a year we should be seventy by the time we had become Romantics! Well, of course that is true, and for some of us, making a Big Change all at once is the best way of doing things, and the New Year may well be a good time to do it. This, however, is something different from the ordinary New Year's resolution.

Here, for those of us who are thinking about ordinary resolutions, are a few to consider. Of course, not all of them will apply to you (at least, we hope not!), but those which do may prove helpful or may suggest ideas of your own.

### I Resolve:

To wear a hat and gloves whenever I leave the house.

To use those handkerchiefs I had for Christmas and renounce paper ones.

To give up television.

To develop three charming mannerisms and to use them at least once each day.

To collect books of stories, essays, 1930s *Punch* articles and other delightful things and to read one every time I am tempted to read a newspaper or other Babylonian periodical.

To eliminate one or more specific pieces of Babylonian jargon from my vocabulary.

To wear only proper stockings.

To adopt certain specific words or phrases into my daily vocabulary.

To discover and use a more striking and Romantic style of make-up.

To select one or more models for speech and/or mannerism from the films and to study him (or her) and work at developing my style.

To make the effort to come to Romantic events and meet other Romantics, even if it *does* involve travel.

Not to be afraid of fine speech and grand gesture, at least among Romantic company.

To *think* in real money and translate every transaction in my own mind (and preferably out loud).

Good luck, dear ones, and a happy new year.